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The elusive Pimpernel

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Chapter XXIV. Colleagues

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CHAPTER XXIV.

COLLEAGUES.

AS soon as the door had closed behind Marguerite there came from somewhere in the room the sound of a yawn, a grunt, and a volley of oaths.

The flickering light of the tallow candles had failed to penetrate into all the corners, and now from out one of these dark depths a certain something began to detach itself, and to move forward towards the table at which Chauvelin had once more resumed his seat.

"Has the damned aristocrat gone at last?" queried a hoarse voice, as a burly body, clad in loose-fitting coat and mud-stained boots and breeches, appeared within the narrow circle of light.

"Yes," replied Chauvelin, curtly.

"And a cursed long time you have been with the baggage," grunted the other surlily. "Another five minutes and I'd have taken the matter in my own hands."

"An assumption of authority," commented Chauvelin, quietly, "to which your position here does not entitle you, Citizen Collot."

Collot d'Herbois lounged lazily forward, and presently he threw his ill-knit figure into the chair lately vacated by Marguerite. His heavy, square face bore distinct traces of the fatigue endured in the past twenty-four hours on horseback or in jolting market wagons. His temper, too, appeared to have suffered on the way, and at Chauvelin's curt and dictatorial replies he looked as surly as a chained dog.

"You were wasting your breath over that woman," he muttered, bringing a large and grimy fist heavily down on the table, "and your measures are not quite so sound as you fondly imagine, Citizen Chauvelin."

"They were mostly of your imagining, Citizen Collot," rejoined the other quietly, "and of your suggestion."

"I added a touch of strength and determination to your mild, milk-and-water notions, citizen," snarled Collot spitefully. "I'd have knocked that intriguing woman's brains out at the very first possible opportunity had I been consulted earlier than this."

"Quite regardless of the fact that such violent measures would completely damn all our chances of success as far as the capture of the Scarlet Pimpernel is concerned," remarked Chauvelin, drily, with a contemptuous shrug of the shoulders. "Once his wife is dead, the Englishman will never run his head into the noose which I have so carefully prepared for him."

"So you say, citizen; and therefore I suggested to you certain measures to prevent the woman escaping which you will find adequate, I hope"

"You need have no fear, Citizen Collot," said

Chauvelin, curtly; "this woman will make no attempt at escape now."

"If she does . . . " and Collot d'Herbois swore an obscene oath.

"I think she understands that we mean to put our threat in execution."

"Threat? . . . It was no empty threat, citizen. . . . Sacré tonnerre! if that woman escapes now, by all the devils in hell I swear that I'll wield the guillotine myself and cut off the head of every able-bodied man or woman in Boulogne with my own hands."

As he said this his face assumed such an expression of inhuman cruelty, such a desire to kill, such a savage lust for blood that instinctively Chauvelin shuddered and shrank away from his colleague. All through his career there is no doubt that this man, who was of gentle birth, of gentle breeding, and who had once been called M. le Marquis de Chauvelin, must have suffered in his susceptibilities and in his pride when in contact with the revolutionaries with whom he had chosen to cast his lot. He could not have thrown off all his old ideas of refinement quite so easily as to feel happy in the presence of such men as Collot d'Herbois, or Marat in his day—men who had become brute beasts, more ferocious far than any wild animal; more scientifically cruel than any feline prowler in jungle or desert.

One look in Collot's distorted face was sufficient at this moment to convince Chauvelin that it were useless for him to view the proclamation against the citizens of Boulogne merely as an idle threat, even if he had wished to do so. That Marguerite would not

under the circumstances attempt to escape, that Sir Percy Blakeney himself would be forced to give up all thoughts of rescuing her, was a foregone conclusion in Chauvelin's mind, but if this high-born English gentleman had not happened to be the selfless hero that he was, if Marguerite Blakeney were cast in a different, a rougher mould—if, in short, the Scarlet Pimpernel, in the face of the proclamation, did succeed in dragging his wife out of the clutches of the Terrorists, then it was equally certain that Collot d'Herbois would carry out his rabid and cruel reprisals to the full. And if, in the course of the wholesale butchery of the able-bodied and wage-earning inhabitants of Boulogne, the headsman should sink worn out, then would this ferocious sucker of blood put his own hand to the guillotine, with the same joy and lust which he had felt when he ordered one hundred and thirty-eight women of Nantes to be stripped naked by the soldiery before they were flung helter-skelter into the river.

A touch of strength and determination! Aye! Citizen Collot d'Herbois had plenty of that. Was it he, or Carrière, who at Arras commanded mothers to stand by while their children were being guillotined? And surely it was Maignet, Collot's friend and colleague, who at Bedouin, because the Red Flag of the Republic had been mysteriously torn down over night, burnt the entire little village down to the last hovel and guillotined every one of the three hundred and fifty inhabitants?

And Chauvelin knew all that. Nay, more! he was himself a member of that so-called government which

had countenanced these butcheries by giving unlimited powers to men like Collot, like Maignet and Carrière. He was at one with them in their Republican ideas, and he believed in the regeneration and the purification of France through the medium of the guillotine, but he propounded his theories and carried out his most bloodthirsty schemes with physically clean hands and in an immaculately-cut coat.

Even now, when Collot d'Herbois lounged before him, with mud-bespattered legs stretched out before him, with dubious linen at neck and wrists, and an odour of rank tobacco and stale, cheap wine pervading his whole personality, the more fastidious man of the world, who had consorted with the dandies of London and Brighton, winced at the enforced proximity.

But it was the joint characteristic of all these men who had turned France into a vast butchery and charnel-house, that they all feared and hated one another, even more whole-heartedly than they hated the aristocrats and so-called traitors whom they sent to the guillotine. Citizen Lebon is said to have dipped his sword into the blood which flowed from the guillotine, whilst exclaiming: "Comme je l'aime ce sang coulé de traître!" but he and Collot and Danton and Robespierre, all of them in fact, would have regarded with more delight still the blood of any one of their colleagues.

At this very moment Collot d'Herbois and Chauvelin would with utmost satisfaction have denounced, one the other, to the tender mercies of the Public Prosecutor. Collot made no secret of his

hatred for Chauvelin, and the latter disguised it but thinly under the veneer of contemptuous indifference.

"As for that damned Englishman," added Collot now, after a slight pause, and with another savage oath, "if 'tis my good fortune to lay hands on him, I'd shoot him then and there like a mad dog, and rid France once and for ever of this accursed spy."

"And think you, Citizen Collot," rejoined Chauvelin, with a shrug of the shoulders, "that France would be rid of all English adventurers by the summary death of this one man?"

"He is the ringleader, at any rate. . . ."

"And has at least nineteen disciples to continue his traditions of conspiracy and intrigue. None, perhaps, so ingenious as himself, none with the same daring and good luck perhaps, but still a number of ardent fools only too ready to follow in the footsteps of their chief. Then there's the halo of martyrdom around the murdered hero, the enthusiasm created by his noble death. . . Nay! nay, citizen, you have not lived among these English people, you do not understand them, or you would not talk of sending their popular hero to an honoured grave."

But Collot d'Herbois only shook his powerful frame like some big, sulky dog, and spat upon the floor to express his contempt of this wild talk, which seemed to have no real tangible purpose.

"You have not caught your Scarlet Pimpernel yet, citizen," he said with a snort.

"No, but I will after sundown to-morrow."

"How do you know?"

"I have ordered the Angelus to be rung at one of

the closed churches, and he agreed to fight a duel with me on the southern ramparts at that hour and on that day," said Chauvelin simply.

"You take him for a fool?" sneered Collot.

"No, only for a foolhardy adventurer."

"You imagine that with his wife as hostage in our hands, and the whole city of Boulogne on the look out for him for the sake of the amnesty, that the man would be fool enough to walk on those ramparts at a given hour for the express purpose of getting himself caught by you and your men?"

"I am quite sure that if we do not lay hands on him before that given hour that he will be on the ramparts at the Angelus to-morrow," said Chauvelin, emphatically.

Collot shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Is the man mad?" he asked with an incredulous laugh.

"Yes, I think so," rejoined the other with a smile.

"And having caught your hare," queried Collot, "how do you propose to cook him?"

"Twelve picked men will be on the ramparts ready to seize him the moment he appears."

"And to shoot him at sight, I hope."

"Only as a last resource, for the Englishman is powerful, and may cause our half-famished men a good deal of trouble. But I want him alive if possible. . . ."

"Why? A dead lion is safer than a live one any day."

"Oh! we'll kill him right enough, citizen. I pray you have no fear. I hold a weapon ready for that

meddlesome Scarlet Pimpernel which will be a thousand times more deadly and more effectual than a chance shot, or even the guillotine."

"What weapon is that, Citizen Chauvelin?"

Chauvelin leaned forward across the table and rested his chin on his hands; instinctively Collot, too, leaned towards him, and both men peered furtively round them, as if wondering if prying ears happened to be lurking round. It was Chauvelin's pale eyes which now gleamed with hatred and with an insatiable lust for revenge at least as powerful as Collot's lust for blood; the unsteady light of the tallow candles threw grotesque shadows across his brows, and his mouth was set in such rigid lines of implacable cruelty that the brutish sot beside him gazed on him amazed, vaguely scenting here a depth of feeling which was beyond his power to comprehend. He repeated his question under his breath:

"What weapon do you mean to use against that accursed spy, Citizen Chauvelin?"

"Dishonour and ridicule!" replied the other quietly.

"Bah!"

"In exchange for his life and that of his wife."

"As the woman told you just now . . . he will refuse."

"We shall see, citizen."

"You are mad to think such things, citizen, and ill serve the Republic by sparing her bitterest foe."

A long, sarcastic laugh broke from Chauvelin's parted lips.

"Spare him?—spare the Scarlet Pimpernel! . . ."

he ejaculated. "Nay, citizen, you need have no fear of that. But, believe me, I have schemes in my head by which the man, whom we all hate, will be more truly destroyed than your guillotine could ever accomplish; schemes whereby the hero who is now worshipped in England as a demi-god will suddenly become an object of loathing and of contempt. . . . Ah! I see you understand me now. . . . I wish to so cover him with ridicule that the very name of the small wayside flower will become a term of derision and of scorn. Only then shall we be rid of these pestilential English spies, only then will the entire League of the Scarlet Pimpernel become a thing of the past when its whilom leader, now thought akin to a god, will have found refuge in a suicide's grave from the withering contempt of the entire world."

Chauvelin had spoken low, hardly above a whisper, and the echo of his last words died away in the great, squalid room like a long drawn out sigh. There was dead silence for awhile save for the murmur of the wind outside and from the floor above the measured tread of the sentinel guarding the precious hostage in No. 6.

Both men were staring straight in front of them. Collot d'Herbois, incredulous, half-contemptuous, did not altogether approve of these schemes, which seemed to him wild and uncanny; he liked the direct simplicity of a summary trial, of the guillotine, or of his own well stage-managed "Noyades." He did not feel that any ridicule or dishonour would necessarily paralyse a man in his efforts at intrigue, and would have liked to set Chauvelin's authority aside,

to behead the woman upstairs and then to take his chance of capturing the man later on.

But the orders of the Committee of Public Safety had been peremptory: he was to be Chauvelin's help, not his master, and to obey him in all things. He did not dare to take any initiative in the matter, for in that case, if he failed, the reprisals against him would indeed be terrible.

He was fairly satisfied now that Chauvelin had accepted his suggestion of summarily sending to the guillotine one member of every family resident in Boulogne if Marguerite succeeded in effecting an escape, and, of a truth, Chauvelin had hailed the fiendish suggestion with delight. The old abbé, with his nephew and niece, were undoubtedly not sufficient deterrents against the daring schemes of the Scarlet Pimpernel, who, as a matter of fact, could spirit them out of Boulogne just as easily as he would his own wife.

Collot's plan tied Marguerite to her own prison cell more completely than any other measure could have done, more so, indeed, than the originator thereof knew or believed. . . . A man like this d'Herbois—born in the gutter, imbued with every brutish tradition which generations of jail-birds had bequeathed to him—would not, perhaps, fully realise the fact that neither Sir Percy nor Marguerite Blakeney would ever save themselves at the expense of others. He had merely made the suggestion, because he felt that Chauvelin's plans were complicated and obscure, and, above all, insufficient, and that perhaps after all the English adventurer and his wife would succeed in

once more outwitting him, when there would remain the grand and bloody compensation of a wholesale butchery in Boulogne.

But Chauvelin was quite satisfied. He knew that under present circumstances neither Sir Percy nor Marguerite would make any attempt at escape. The ex-ambassador had lived in England: he understood the class to which these two belonged, and was quite convinced that no attempt would be made on either side to get Lady Blakeney away, whilst the present ferocious order against the breadwinner of every family in the town held good.

Aye! the measures were sound enough. Chauvelin was easy in his mind about that. In another twenty-four hours he would hold the man completely in his power who had so boldly outwitted him last year; to-night he would sleep in peace—an entire city was guarding the precious hostage.

"We'll go to bed now, citizen," he said to Collot, who, tired and sulky, was moodily fingering the papers on the table. The scraping sound which he made thereby grated on Chauvelin's overstrung nerves. He wanted to be alone, and the sleepy brute's presence here jarred on his own solemn mood.

To his satisfaction, Collot grunted a surly assent. Very leisurely he rose from his chair, stretched out his loose limbs, shook himself like a shaggy cur, and, without uttering another word, he gave his colleague a curt nod and slowly lounged out of the room.